



Transportation officials: Illinois gas tax increase is needed

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Illinois Department of Transportation Secretary Randy Blankenhorn, left, and Lindsay Hollander, a senior policy analyst for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, talk about transportation issues at an event co-sponsored by the Better Government Association and The State Journal-Register on Wednesday. [Brenden Moore/SJ-R]

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Just a few days after Illinois marked 200 years of statehood, state officials and experts attempted to sketch out its future on three crucial topics.

At an event sponsored by the Better Government Association and The State Journal-Register in Springfield, experts on transportation, technology and gender equity shared their thoughts on where the state needs to go in the future.

Transportation

With nearly a decade having passed since lawmakers approved Illinois' last major capital program, billions of dollars worth of deferred maintenance has racked up.

To give an idea, about three-fourths of all bridges in the state are in need of repair.

And according to a panel of transportation experts, the problem will only get worse in the future unless the state begins to better fund investments in its transportation system.

"We're behind, to be perfectly frank," said IDOT Secretary Randy Blankenhorn, one of the

panelists. “We are not funding transportation as well as some of our neighbors and as our competitors. ... I spend \$250 a month on my phone. I spend \$50 a month for water. This is the infrastructure of my life. It’s what I need to make things happen. And we’re spending 50 cents a day on transportation. And, honestly, it’s inadequate.”

To help fix the chronic funding problem, an increase in the state gas tax, which has not been raised since 1990, and vehicle registration fees will be inevitable, Blankenhorn said.

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Blankenhorn said such an increase would provide “revenue necessary to maintain, enhance, modernize our system. That’s the conversation that we need to have.”

While voters in 2016 overwhelmingly approved a “lockbox” amendment, which prohibits the use of state transportation funds for any other purpose, Blankenhorn called it a “distraction” from the need to adequately fund transportation.

“My boss, the governor (Bruce Rauner), said, ‘OK, so how much money are we going to get out of the lockbox?’ And the answer was none,” Blankenhorn said. “Legislators said, ‘So you don’t need any new revenue because you have the lockbox.’ Not true.”

Lindsay Hollander, a senior policy analyst for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, agreed, saying that the gas tax should be raised at least 15 cents.

Such an increase would give Illinois, which currently has the 10th-highest state gas tax rate, the third-highest rate in the country.

“Our funding system has not really kept pace with some of the evolving trends, even past trends in the transportation system, and we need to make sure that it’s not only going to be brought up to modern times, but we really need to look at the future and see how we can construct a funding system,” Hollander said.

Blankenhorn, Hollander and Imad Al-Qadi, the director of the Illinois Center on Transportation, also discussed the future of driverless vehicles in the state.

“Driverless vehicles are going to come, whether we want them to or not,” Blankenhorn said. “And we can stick our head in the sand and pretend it isn’t going to happen, or we can do it the right way.”

Information

Rep. Jaime Andrade, D-Chicago, chair of House Cybersecurity, Data Analytics & IT committee, believes that “data is the next natural resource” and has the potential to revolutionize an antiquated state government.

"We had in the state of Illinois over 2,500 different applications," Andrade said. "We had some systems that were built in 1974 that were still being run."

The problem is, he said, getting his colleagues to comprehend what technology is coming and why it's a good idea for the state to invest in that future.

"I have to tell you, there's 118 of us just in the House. It's a huge, huge difference of knowledge," Andrade said. "So trying to convince my colleagues that we need to spend a couple hundred million is very, very difficult."

But Andrade said investing in technology like Blockchain can save the state millions of dollars in the long run by making state government more organized and efficient.

Andrade was joined on the panel by Matt Topic, a government transparency and media lawyer who believes that such technology has the potential to make government more open and easier for Freedom of Information Act filers to navigate.

Gender equity

While lauding efforts over the past year to root out sexual harassment and bullying in the Statehouse and on political campaigns, Illinois lawmakers say there is still more to be done.

Sen. Melinda Bush, D-Grayslake, in a panel discussion featuring Rep. Carol Ammons, D-Urbana, and Sens. Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, and Jil Tracy, R-Quincy, said there must be a continued focus on changing the culture that allowed harassment and bullying to persist for so many years.

Bush said the cultural shift comes through in multiple ways, such as bystander training, which teaches people how to intervene if they believe harassment or bullying is taking place. But ultimately, Bush said the shift will come by elevating more women to positions of power.

"I want to help build other leaders, share leadership with other women," Bush said. "I think that's so important and powerful because the more women that we share leadership with and groom them into that environment and give them that support, more women are going to be at the table."

Panelists also said that, after focusing most of their attention this year on state government and politics, they hope to turn their attention to sexual harassment and bullying in the private sector.

Bush said she will work in the coming year to pass a bill she filed that that will limit the use of non-disclosure clauses in employment contracts and settlement cases and allow victims of harassment to obtain protective orders, among other provisions.

In addition, Tracy said legislators are conducting their final interviews for the Legislative Inspector General position next week and hope to name someone by the end of the year.

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